
Subject: Housing and Homelessness Action Plan Update 2023

Report To: Public Health and Social Services Committee

Report date: Tuesday, May 7, 2024

Recommendations

1. That this report **BE RECEIVED** for information.

Key Facts

- The purpose of this report is to update Council and the Ministry, as legislatively required, on activities and progress completed in 2023 related to Niagara's Housing and Homelessness Action Plan (HHAP).
- Consolidated Municipal Service Managers are required to report to the public and Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing by June 30 each year with respect to efforts of the previous year. This report serves to meet the legal requirement for 2023.
- The HHAP provides a complete vision for aligning activities to address current and future need in Niagara related to affordable housing and homelessness.
- By the end of December 2023, 84% progress had been made toward finishing all 75 actions in the updated HHAP.
- Areas of focus for 2024 include completing the review of the original Action Plan, completion of a new draft Action Plan for 2024 to 2033, and supporting Indigenous access to land, Indigenous-led housing development, affordable home ownership and homelessness services by Indigenous organizations for Indigenous people.
- Work on a new Housing and Homelessness Action Plan for the period 2024 to 2033 began in January 2023. The final development of a new action plan will be completed once the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing provides direction.

Financial Considerations

The resources required to facilitate the management of the Housing and Homelessness Action Plan (HHAP) are provided within the approved annual budget.

Analysis

The purpose of this report is to update Council and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MMAH) on progress achieved in 2023 related to Niagara's updated HHAP. Consolidated Municipal Service Managers (CMSM) are required by legislation to report

to the public and MMAH by June 30 each year with respect to efforts of the previous year. This report serves to meet the requirement for 2023.

The HHAP was developed in response to the *Housing Services Act 2011, section 6*, which requires municipalities to establish and implement a 10-year plan to address local housing and homelessness needs. The five-year review and updated HHAP was approved by Regional Council in October 2019 and acknowledged by MMAH in March 2020. The updated plan provides guidance for the five-year period of 2019-2023. December 31, 2023 marks the end of the 10th year of the 10-year Action Plan. Although the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MMAH) has not yet provided guidance for next steps, staff have been undergoing the process to develop a new Action Plan for the period of 2024-2033. The lack of a completed and endorsed plan does not in any way mean work has stopped or slowed. Staff and community partners continue to work on homeless services system transformation, maintaining and increasing supply of affordable housing, and developing and implementing services for Indigenous people and families experiencing homelessness. Completion of a new HHAP will be a significant action/outcome related to the Strategic Priority Operational Team (SPOT) for an Inclusive community.

The HHAP provides a complete vision for aligning activities to address current and future need in Niagara related to affordable housing and homelessness. The plan is responsive to ongoing changes in the community, and the housing market, that affect local demand for homelessness services and affordable housing over the long term. The HHAP integrates with other Region strategies and initiatives, including the Niagara Official Plan (NOP), Niagara Housing Database, Consolidated Housing Master Plan (CHMP), Niagara's Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan (CSWP), Niagara's Poverty Reduction Strategy, Built for Zero Canada (BFZ-C), attainable housing and strategic initiatives, direct investment in housing, and Regional development incentive programs.

The HHAP incorporates recognized Canadian best and emerging practices in housing and homeless services to address the whole continuum of housing and supports from interventions like assertive street outreach and short-term emergency accommodation, to permanent community, affordable and market housing options. Best practices include the use of a Quality By Name List (QBNL) of all people experiencing homelessness in the community, a common assessment of need and coordinated access (CA) to connect people to the housing and supports that best meet their needs. Increasingly, Niagara is being recognized as a leader for its data driven approach, meaningful engagement of lived experts, and service innovations such as Bridge Housing. As a Built for Zero community, Niagara is committed to decreasing the number of people

experiencing chronic homelessness and ensuring the experience of homelessness is brief and non-recurring.

Niagara Region cannot accomplish the goals of the HHAP on its own, and so must partner broadly with housing and homelessness services providers, across the health, corrections and child welfare systems, with municipal, provincial and federal governments, with private developers and with Indigenous organizations and communities. The HHAP working groups support collaboration on service and system improvements in ten focus areas. Working group participants align initiatives, work together on improvement projects, and provide input to the CMSM about service and system planning on an ongoing basis. In 2023 the HHAP working groups included:

- Assertive Street Outreach
- Housing-Focused Shelter
- Supported Transitional Housing
- Housing First and Home for Good (Supportive Housing)
- Coordinated Access and By-Name List
- Lived Expert Advisory
- Homelessness Prevention
- Housing Provider Advisory
- Housing Affordability Innovation
- Exits from Justice

The HHAP continued to guide post-pandemic responses in 2023, that aligned with long-term system goals. By the end of December 2023 84% progress had been made toward finishing all 75 actions in the updated HHAP. At that time, 57 actions were completed, 12 had seen progress toward completion and 6 required significant work to be completed. Actions still requiring significant work include those related to working with Indigenous partners to address the need for housing and supports for Indigenous individuals and families needing affordable housing or homelessness. Areas of focus for 2024 include completing the review of the original Action Plan, completion of a new Action Plan, and supporting Indigenous access to land, Indigenous-led housing development, affordable home ownership and homelessness services by Indigenous organizations for Indigenous people.

Highlights from 2023 related to the four (4) HHAP overarching goals include:

Goal 1 – House People Who do not Have a Home

By the end of December 2023, 95% progress had been made toward finishing the 11 actions related to Goal 1. Ten (10) of these actions were completed and one (1) had seen progress toward completion. Key accomplishments since 2019 include: the alignment of efforts toward achieving functional zero chronic homelessness; a shift to assertive street outreach and low-barrier housing-focused shelters; introduction of a Quality By-Name List (QBNL) and Coordinated Access (CA); and identification of opportunities to better support high acuity clients experiencing chronic homelessness. Progress and accomplishments in 2023 include:

- In July 2023, the Housing First program was allocated seven additional (7) units, including four (4) bachelors, two (2) accessible bachelors, and one (1) 2-bedroom—in a new Niagara Regional Housing building on York Street in Welland. Based on the funding agreement for the building, four (4) indigenous individuals from the homeless By-Name List were housed in the bachelor units. In partnership with the Niagara Regional Native Centre, three (3) other units were occupied by indigenous households as there were no eligible individuals identified on the homeless By-Name List. In total, nine (9) Indigenous individuals were housed in the 7 units: five (5) individuals, one (1) couple and one (1) single parent with child.
- In response to the Shelter Capacity Review recommendations, that the system move away from seasonal shelters, and further to the acquisition of a building in Niagara

Falls, a plan was made to operate a 60-bed shelter at this location. Unable to secure community provider to operate, Niagara Region entered into direct operations and opened the doors of the Summer Street shelter at the beginning of November. The Region is committed to operating this shelter for the short term after which operations will again be put out for proposal to the community. Summer Street shelter operates, as all shelters in the system, in a housing-focused manner, providing the supports and case management to individuals as they move toward the goal of becoming housed. The shelter replaces the seasonal shelter previously opened each winter in Niagara Falls by providing year-round, 24-hour shelter beds and supports.

- Through a successful grant application, Niagara Region piloted a position of a Veteran Outreach Worker to focus on working with Veterans experiencing homelessness starting in Dec 2022. The Veteran Outreach Worker is a Veteran themselves and the impact of shared experience has been monumental. This has allowed the identification of more Veterans experiencing homelessness than was previously known, and provided a connection for those individuals to financial benefits from their military service and advocacy for increased support. Since the pilot launch, six (6) Veterans experiencing homelessness have been housed. The Veteran Outreach Worker is actively working with 15 individuals.
- In June 2023, Niagara Region staff, in partnership with the team leads of the Niagara Assertive Street Outreach (NASO) program, further developed the Hot Spot Encampment Mapping system. Improvements included making the tool more accessible on mobile devices and removing barriers to real-time documentation. This system ensures individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness are included on the By-Name List and maximizes the capacity of Niagara's partner agencies. The priority for the Niagara Assertive Street Outreach team remains supporting individuals, experiencing unsheltered homelessness, to access housing-focused shelters, or to support them directly into appropriate housing. This approach—and the improvements to the technology that supports the work—is in alignment with recent Ontario court rulings and human rights.
- NASO was able to support 264 unique individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness to access emergency shelter and 164 unique individuals to access housing in 2023. This work was aided by the above-noted mapping tool. According to the tool, by November 2023, there were 87 active encampments in the region. This is down from 119 active encampments in December 2022.

- The Housing Priority Waitlist was updated to increase coordination between the Housing Services Waitlist and the homeless By-Name List and improve access to community housing for those experiencing homelessness.

In 2023, an average of 28 chronically homeless people per month were supported to exit to housing. At the end of December, there were 1,231 clients active on Niagara's By-Name List, with 594 (or 48%) experiencing chronic homelessness. This compares to 1,099 clients with 550 (or 50%) experiencing chronic homelessness at the same time in the previous year. The continued increase in those experiencing chronic homelessness (homeless for six (6) months or more in the last year, or 18 months in the past three (3) years) during the past 12 months is attributed in part to the increased cost and limited vacancy rates for affordable rental units and a lack of sufficient permanent supportive housing, making it progressively more difficult for individuals to exit homelessness.

Areas of focus for 2024 include further improving access to emergency shelter based on the recommendations of the shelter capacity review, work on a purpose-built Bridge housing facility at Geneva Street in St. Catharines, expanding program entry through coordinated access and launching Indigenous Assertive Street Outreach and Housing First pilots.

Goal 2 – Help People to Retain a Home

By the end of December 2023, 75% progress had been made toward finishing the 16 actions related to Goal 2. Eleven (11) of these actions were completed, two (2) had seen progress, and four (4) required significant work to be completed. Key accomplishments since 2019 include providing enhanced services for persons with concurrent disorders and working in partnership with the Ontario Health Team (OHT) and Regional Essential Access to Connected Healthcare (REACH) Niagara to provide health, mental health and addictions support for persons experiencing homelessness. Progress and accomplishments in 2023 include:

- Community Programs Coordinators provided eviction prevention, tenant support and community engagement in NRH Public Housing, with 4,445 referrals in 2023
- In addition to tenant support and eviction prevention, funding from the Ontario Priorities Housing Initiative (OPHI) enabled Niagara Region Housing Services to assist Non-Profit and Cooperative Housing Providers to address social issues on their properties and through community engagement improve tenant and community relations and well-being.

- In 2023, the Niagara Renovates program funded 31 households with housing repairs, or modifications for persons with disabilities in order to help them maintain their housing.
- In 2023, Homelessness Services funded a third full-time diversion worker position, expanding shelter diversion coverage to include The Salvation Army Booth Centre and The Hope Centre. Diversion rates remained strong at over one fifth of those looking to access shelter, with the highest rate of diversion for those new to shelter, as indicated in the chart below.

Successful Diversion	Adult - New to Shelter	Adult - Not New	Adult - All	Youth - New to Shelter	Youth - Not New	Youth - All	Grand Total
No	83.5%	94.0%	92.3%	22.6%	66.9%	50.4%	78.9%
Yes	16.5%	6.0%	7.7%	77.4%	33.1%	49.6%	21.1%
Grand Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

- Throughout 2023, a consortium of homelessness prevention organizations continued their work in aligning service delivery for eviction and housing loss prevention and trusteeship and ensuring equitable and consistent service across the Niagara region.

Areas for focus for 2024 include improved homelessness prevention for Indigenous persons by supporting exits from provincial systems, addressing discrimination as a barrier to housing, and supporting the right to housing.

Goal 3 – Increase Housing Options and Opportunities for Low- and Moderate-Income Households

By the end of December 2023, 85% progress had been made toward finishing the 24 actions related to Goal 3. Eighteen of these actions were completed, three (3) had seen progress, and two (2) required significant work to be completed. Key accomplishments since 2019 include development of an affordable housing strategy, supporting local municipal affordable housing plans, securing financing for capital repair needs, addressing End of Operating/Mortgage agreements and supporting not for profit

housing provider capacity to develop new units. Progress and accomplishments in 2023 include:

- Niagara Regional Housing (NRH), opened a 43-unit apartment building on York Street in Welland. This community provides homes for a mix of tenants, including the prioritization of: households experiencing homelessness; households with disabilities; black, indigenous and people of colour; and survivors of domestic violence. Housing Services continues to explore possible sites for new development in the anticipation of future funding.
- Housing Services' Community Programs Coordinators continued to provide eviction prevention and tenant support to Non-Profit and Cooperative Housing Providers and tenants living in Rent Supplement units, with 82 Housing Provider referrals and 42 Rent Supplement referrals in 2023.
- In 2023, 310 new Niagara recipients received the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit (COHB). COHB is a portable rent benefit that helps applicants on the centralized waiting list pay their rent to their current landlord in the private market. As of December 31, 2023, there were 889 households receiving COHB in Niagara.
- The Welcome Home Niagara home ownership program had three (3) successful closes in 2023. This program makes home ownership a reality for low to moderate income households in Niagara through down payment assistance of a 5% forgivable loan.
- As Housing Providers come to the end of their mortgages and, as a result, the end of their contractual agreements with Housing Services, staff are working to retain these units for Community Housing through a framework that will be taken to Council in 2024
- Niagara's Consolidated Housing Master Plan (CHMP) continues to serve as a guide for the development of new community housing units and provides a long-term roadmap to 2041 to ensure the sustainability of existing community housing stock and outline the future needs for affordable housing stock in Niagara.
- As part of the Rent Supplement Program, the Insitu Rent Supplement strategy offered Rent-Geared-to-Income (RGI) assistance to applicants on the centralized waitlist where they currently live. Through this strategy, 53 new agreements were initiated with private landlords in 2023, supporting these households to be successfully removed from the waitlist.
- New Housing Development highlights across Niagara, as of the end of December 2023:

- 5925 Summer Street in Niagara Falls – a temporary housing-focused shelter that started operating in November 2023.
- 29 Riordon Street in St. Catharines – a temporary housing-focused shelter, built with portable structures, in place for approximately two years starting February 2024.
- 9 Chestnut Park in Port Colborne – 41 unit affordable housing apartment by Port Cares for low income seniors and single-parent households. This apartment is 30% complete and on track for completion in December of 2024.
- 745 Crescent Road in Fort Erie – 18 unit affordable housing building focused on serving those escaping gender-based violence, with the building to be operated by Niagara Regional Housing and operations to be tendered by Community Services. This building is 20% complete with occupancy date to be determined.
- 255 High Street in Fort Erie – 62 unit affordable housing apartment by Lions Douglas for low income seniors, with project management to support site proposal and application for funding provided by Housing Services. This apartment is 0% complete with occupancy to be determined.
- 171 Mill Street in Smithville – 52 unit build by Legion Villa with project management provided by Housing Services. This project is 0% complete with a target completion date of December 2026.
- 8055 McLeod Road in Niagara Falls – 90 unit build by Niagara Falls Non-profit Housing with project management provided by Housing Services. This building is 0% complete with a target completion date of August 2027.
- 320 Geneva Street in St. Catharines – 48 to 50 units. This property is 1% complete and will be completed in 3 phases (including Phase 1 for Bridge Housing). Completion dates for each phase is yet to be determined.
- In addition, Housing Services is providing project management support to 3 new community-led developments with more than 129 new affordable housing units at various stages of development.
- Work on attainable housing moved forward in 2023 through the creation of the new Strategic Transformation Office, a key focus of which is Attainable Housing. A workplan outlining initiatives in this area was in development at end of 2023.
- In light of anticipated provincial changes to Regional, and by extension local municipal planning, the focus of work to streamline development processes has been on the building permit process. Shared Services under the Strategic Transformation Office is leading this work.

- Staff continue to review and revise the affordable housing incentive programs as part of the ongoing assessment of Bill 23's impact on affordable housing projects, funding and incentives.

In 2023, Niagara's low-to moderate income renters continued to experience a more challenging market as rents continue to increase faster than incomes. In 2023 the average market rent (AMR) for two-bedroom unit was \$1388 (up 8.4% from the previous year).¹ Rising interest rates and high house prices have kept renters, who would have transitioned to home ownership, in their rental units, further increasing demand for rental units. While the overall vacancy rate in Niagara appears to be healthy at 2.8%, this number should be considered with caution as historically lower vacancy rates for more affordable units have been offset by higher vacancy rates for more expensive rental units.² Additionally, the large increase in average rents was due, in part, to the difference between rents paid by new tenants and those paid by long-term tenants. In 2023, the average asking rent for units that turned over to new tenants was 25.7% higher than rents paid by long-term tenants. This makes it particularly challenging for those looking to enter into a new rental tenancy. A challenging rental market, particularly for more affordable rental units increases demand for community housing.

The need for affordable housing continues to grow. In 2023 the centralized housing waitlist grew by 13% from 10,107 to 11,396 households. This represents an additional 1,289 individuals waiting for community housing.

At the end of 2023, there were 8,428 community housing units in Niagara, including more than 3,072 NRH-owned, 3,166 provider owned, 2,190 rent supplement/housing allowance/COHB units and 918 new affordable units.

Areas for focus for 2024 include ensuring adequate resources are available to support local need for affordable housing and supporting Indigenous access to land and incentives for new development.

¹ Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation Rental Market Report 2023 (2024, January)

² Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation Urban Rental Market Survey Data – Vacancy Rates by Rent Quartile 2022.

Goal 4 – Build Capacity and Improve the Effectiveness and Efficiency of the Housing and Homelessness System

By the end of December 2023, 83% progress had been made toward finishing the 24 actions related to Goal 4. Seventeen (17) of these actions were completed, six (6) had seen progress, and one (1) required significant work to be completed. Key accomplishments since 2019 include developing a common system vision to end homelessness, improving the accuracy and completeness of the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) data, increasing the use of systems standards, engaging lived experts in decision-making and system planning, increasing frequency and quality of communications and participating in the BFZ-C cohorts working to end chronic and veteran homelessness. Progress and accomplishments in 2023 include:

- In January 2023 staff began the process to develop a new Housing and Homelessness Action Plan for the period of 2024 to 2033.
- In 2023, homelessness services staff supported capacity building by increasing the training to service provider staff including:
 - Trauma Informed Care
 - Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (SPDAT) training for six (6) local SPDAT trainers who then trained over 60 direct service staff
 - Housing Focused Shelter training
 - Diversion training for Prevention providers
 - Rapid Rehousing Training
 - Eviction & Housing Loss Prevention Training
 - Media training was offered to partner agency leadership.
- To improve morale of direct service staff, over 100 service provider staff from across Niagara Region gathered on July 25 to be recognized for their tireless work toward ending chronic and veteran homelessness.
- Niagara Region engaged service providers on a new Pathway to Functional Zero resource that details the community's shared projects and priorities, key policy changes, and what is to come. A document outlining key activities and successes was made available online and in print form in August 2023.

A key component of BFZ-C, the QBNL supports system planning to meet community need. Of the 2,183 unique individuals who accessed emergency shelter in 2023, the largest proportion were single men (40%), single women (21%), including refugees

(13%), Indigenous individuals (7%). 142 individuals (7% of shelter clients) had 180+ days in shelter.

Areas for focus for 2024 include supporting staff retention throughout the homeless serving system, providing Indigenous Cultural Safety training to homeless services providers and improving service manager engagement with Indigenous organizations, and working with Niagara Indigenous Community Advisory Board (NICAB) to fund Indigenous organizations for Indigenous-led housing and homelessness solutions

Alternatives Reviewed

There are no applicable alternatives as reporting on the HHAP is required under the *Housing Services Act, 2011*, per its regulations as noted in the Analysis on page 1.

Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities

- This report supports the council priority of an Equitable Region by providing access to affordable and inclusive housing options.

Other Pertinent Reports

- COM 40-2019 Five-Year Review of Niagara's 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Action Plan
- COM 12-2023 Housing and Homelessness Action Plan Update 2022

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Appendices

None